

Resignations add to Wollaston council concerns

By Jim Eadie

Following the bombshell announcement of Wollaston deputy fire chief Dave Jackson's resignation from the department two weeks ago, five more senior firefighters have resigned, including the fire chief. Jackson, at the time of his resignation, pointed to 'a couple of council members' bringing a new direction causing him to feel uncomfortable, and not valued or appreciated by part of council. Following his year-end report to council during the Dec. 13 Wollaston Township regular council meeting, Wollaston fire chief Rick Middleton told council he was resigning his post at the end of the year as well.

'I have held off on this,' he said. 'I didn't want to create a lack of confidence in our department. If I am part of the problem fine, but now I need to be more vocal as a private citizen. I put a lot of effort into this department.'

'I am very reluctant to accept your resignation,' said Reeve Graham Blair. He noted that he was aware of the resignation coming, and had already consulted with Limerick Township fire chief Jason Post, and Reeve Sharon Carsons, who are willing to discuss interim leadership assistance.

'I think this should be taken to the fire department meeting here tonight, and discussed with the members,' said Blair. 'My opinion and hope is that the collective voice of the members of the department will make that decision.'

Council also agreed for the need to do a comprehensive review of the fire department, the needs of the firefighters, and hire a consultant to undertake such a report.

On Dec. 17, Wollaston Township issued a press release stating that despite the current difficulties, the fire department is still active and able to respond to emergency situations.

In his resignation letter presented to council, Middleton was blunt about the problems as he sees them.

'I and my deputy chief, Dave Jackson, have made consistent attempts over the previous four to six months to allay the concerns of some council members and their mistrust of the administration of the fire department,' he wrote. 'Despite our best efforts to get to the root of the problem, and resolve outstanding concerns, the events of the previous council meeting of Nov. 22 confirmed there is an unspoken agenda at play. I feel there is no possibility of resolving the situation in my current position.'

Council preparing for new library

Wollaston Township is also in the process of setting up its own library, following the withdrawal of Limerick Township for the longstanding union library board. On Jan. 1, a new library board becomes responsible for the Wollaston Library, and by all accounts has a huge task ahead to re-vision, and re-structure the library. The municipal responsibility for libraries extends only to appointing a board, and approving the budget. Beyond that, the library board is responsible for the library. On Nov. 22, Wollaston council had approved the appointment of five community volunteers to the library board, which is the minimum necessary. In addition, council appointed Fuerth and Kruger as council representatives to the new board. Having a change of heart, Blair brought forward a motion to rescind the appointment of Fuerth and Kruger to the library board.

'My feeling is that we have five awesome volunteers for the library board, and I think the board has to do its important work unencumbered by council,' he said.

'I've got to say I was delighted we had five candidates who applied,' said Councillor Bob Ireland. 'I think it is important that the board operate independently as it relates to the operation of the Wollaston Library, and have good communication with council. They can elect a chairperson who will come and talk to us. They have public meetings if any of us want to go, we just don't participate.'

'It is a good thing to let them re-vision the library,' said Deputy Reeve Marilyn Brickles. 'They have a good committee, and that will encourage more people to come forward.'

'I think our relationship to the board is what is important,' said Blair.

'Let them sort out the things that need to happen to make our new library vibrant and viable,' said Ireland. 'If they feel they need to, or want to come to a council meeting and get our view we would be absolutely OK with that. I am opposed to us taking our views to the board of citizens. We need to let them do it on their own.'

'Most library boards have council members sitting on them,' said Kruger. 'There is a good reason. It helps in the grant process.'

'If they need our help, they will ask,' said Brickles. 'The Wollaston Library is a gem. Let's give the Wollaston Library a chance.'

'There is only one library in Ontario with no council members on the board, apparently,' said Fuerth.

'Just because other townships do it, doesn't mean we have to,' said Blair. 'There is more than one example of our township making difficult choices and taking a lead: our private roads grant program for example, our fire department is the only one in North Hastings doing medical assist, and our trailer bylaw.'

The motion to rescind the appointment of Fuerth and Kruger to the Wollaston Library board was carried, with Fuerth and Kruger voting against the motion.

Wollaston Township council has agreed to begin a trial period of electronically recording meetings on their second meeting in January 2017. The clerk will bring forward a draft policy at the first meeting in Jan. 10, along with details on audio and or video requirements and costs.